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Westmoreland Told Not to Inform Media

Vietnam Troop Strength Data Was Ordered Embargoed During War

By Eleanor Randolph
Washington Post Staff Writer

NEW YORK, Oct. 18—Gen. William C. Westmoreland was ordered in early 1967 to review higher troop estimates before they went to President Lyndon B. Johnson and to keep new data away from news media because it "would literally blow the lid off of Washington," according to declassified cables offered today in U.S. District Court.

As part of Westmoreland's \$120 million libel action against CBS Inc., CBS lawyer David Boies put into evidence two cables to the former head of Army troops in Vietnam from the late Gen. Earle G. Wheeler, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff during the crucial period before the 1968 Tet offensive.

Wheeler said in a cable March 9, 1967, that Westmoreland should "do whatever is necessary to insure these figures are not, repeat not, released to news media or otherwise exposed to public knowledge."

In a longer cable two days later, Wheeler told Westmoreland that there were "major and serious" implications from new data showing increases in large-scale enemy attacks. Though he warned against any efforts to "weigh the dice" in intelligence data, the cable said a release of such data would be "dynamite."

"I cannot go to the President and tell him that—contrary to my reports and those of the other Chiefs as to progress of the war in which we have laid great stress upon the thesis [that] you have seized the initiative from the enemy—the situation is such that we are not sure who has the initiative in South Vietnam," Wheeler said.

At issue is whether Westmoreland was libeled by a 1982 CBS documentary which charged that he was part of a conspiracy by top military leaders to suppress evidence of higher enemy troop strength not only to the media and public but to his commander in chief, President Johnson.

CBS contended in the documentary called "The Uncounted Enemy: A Vietnam Deception" that because the military had kept a

ceiling on estimates of communist troop strength in late 1967, the public and the president were surprised by the massive Tet uprising in South Vietnam on Jan. 30, 1968, and that the psychological loss of support after Tet was a turning point in the war.

CBS lawyers used the Wheeler cables in an effort to prove that there had been pres-

sure from the military's highest levels to suppress evidence of a larger enemy. CBS has also tried to prove that Westmoreland's command shaved figures in some troop categories and shed self-defense or "home guard" segments from the official Order of Battle summaries to keep official troop assessments from increasing.

During morning testimony, one of Westmoreland's witnesses appeared to support the CBS contention that "self defense units" and "secret self defense" units belonged in the official tally of enemy strength. Previous supporting witnesses had all testified that those units were not considered as threatening as other guerrilla groups and that they were loosely-knit squads of women, children and old people.

But retired Col. Edward H. Caton of St. Petersburg, Fla., chief of joint intelligence under Westmoreland in 1966 and 1967, said some of the self defense units used "passive devices" including claymore mines, satchel charges and booby traps that caused casualties as troops moved near them. Caton said he did not know the extent of such casualties.